

*Remarks of Chairman Bruce Cole
“Picturing America”
UNESCO Headquarters
Paris, France
September 30, 2008
AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY*

Good evening. Thank you, Director-General Matsuura, for your kind words. I’m delighted to be in Paris and honored to visit UNESCO. I’m grateful to the Director-General and my good friend, Ambassador Louise Oliver, for the opportunity to speak to so many distinguished guests.

Let me begin by briefly describing my agency, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and what we do. The NEH is an independent agency of the United States Federal government. It was founded in 1965 to foster the humanities — disciplines such as history, philosophy, literature, art history, archeology, languages, and many more.

We fulfill our mission through grants to universities, scholars, teachers, museums and libraries, and other institutions. Through a variety of programs, NEH strives to bring the wisdom and insights of the humanities to every U.S. citizen.

Our newest initiative, which I will discuss this evening, is called Picturing America. Through Picturing America, the NEH is offering to U.S. schools and public libraries forty large, high-quality reproductions of great American art. Along with these reproductions, we are providing resources to help teachers and librarians display the images and explain their importance.

Picturing America would not have been possible without the support of many people and institutions. The NEH is grateful to the National Trust for the Humanities its Chairman and President, Robert Perry, who is here this evening, as well as the President’s Committee for the Arts and the Humanities, represented here tonight by Margaret Robson. They both provided essential support for Picturing America and for this event.

I’m also grateful to the Institute of Museum and Library Services and its director, Anne Radice, for their generous support of Picturing America. Anne will discuss IMLS’s involvement in a few minutes.

What does art tell us about a civilization or a people? Artists do not work in isolation, and their art does not originate in a void; it grows out of a culture, a civilization. Art speaks dynamically and forcefully about where a people have come from; what they have endured; and where they are headed. By studying and understanding a civilization’s art, we can learn much about how that civilization views itself and its place in the broader story of humanity.

To cite just two examples: It is impossible to imagine the history of ancient Egypt without thinking of the great pyramids, or the history of Renaissance Italy without recalling the works of Michelangelo and Leonardo. What these civilizations accomplished through their art greatly affects how we understand them. Art helps us dig below the essential facts of history and discover insights into the character, ideals, and aspirations of a nation.

This is true of the United States as well. The history and culture of the U.S. are wonderfully illuminated by our nation's art. The purpose of NEH's Picturing America initiative is to take this story directly to our citizens, particularly our young people, in an engaging and innovative way. By using works of art to help them *see* better, we can help them to *understand* better the continuing drama of the American experiment in self-government.

At this point, I'd like to show the first of two brief films created by the History Channel to help the NEH promote Picturing America. This first film provides an excellent overview of how the program is being used in U.S. classrooms.

[History Channel video #1 plays on the monitor.]

As this video shows, NEH designed Picturing America to give teachers and students the freedom and flexibility to use the program as it best suits their needs and purposes. The U.S. has no national education curriculum; our elementary and secondary public education is locally controlled. Through Picturing America, the NEH is providing resources — both tangible and on the Internet — for teachers and also for library programs.

I should also note that these 40 images are not intended to be a canon, or to represent what the U.S. government believes are the absolute 40 greatest works of American art. Picturing America is a representative sampling of U.S. art — one could choose an entirely different set of 40 images that would serve the program's purpose just as well.

Our goal was to choose works of art that met three basic criteria. First, we wanted works from a variety of artistic media — including paintings, photographs, sculpture, architecture, and decorative arts. Second, we wanted the collection to represent, as best as possible, the whole chronology of American history — so Picturing America includes works from over one thousand years ago up to the present day. And third, we wanted to select works that would help citizens connect with the people, places, events, and ideas that have shaped our nation's history and culture.

Our hope is that Picturing America will encourage teachers and students to go beyond this collection of 40 images, and look at other works of art in a new way — asking what those works can also tell us about our history and culture.

On that note, let me now play the second brief promotional film created by the History Channel. This film explores how Picturing America can be used to elucidate some of the fundamental themes and principles of U.S. history and culture.

[History Channel video #2 plays on the monitor]

The NEH is grateful to the History Channel for producing these two films.

To explore the thematic aspects of Picturing America a bit further, let's look at just two of the images in detail, and see how they can help citizens learn and think about the themes of Freedom and Equality.

[Image of "Washington Crossing the Delaware" appears on monitor]

Here is a painting by the German-American artist Emanuel Leutze, titled *Washington Crossing the Delaware*. It depicts a key moment during the American Revolution. General Washington's army was demoralized after a series of lost battles and retreats, and the cause of American independence looked bleak. So, on Christmas night in 1776, Washington led his army on a daring nighttime crossing of the icy Delaware River. The next morning, they launched a surprise attack on the British and Hessian forces in Trenton, New Jersey. The resulting victory restored the morale of the army, and helped turn the tide of the war.

In this massive painting, Leutze provides a vivid depiction of the courage of American's founding generation. The painting conveys just how improbable the American Revolution really was — and thus renews our appreciation for what these men did to establish a new nation based on the ideals set forth in the Declaration of Independence: Freedom and Equality.

[Image of "Selma-to-Montgomery March for Voting Rights in 1965" appears on monitor]

Now let's move ahead to the 20th century. Here is a photograph by James Karales of the March for Voting Rights from Selma-to-Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965. The marchers were peacefully demonstrating to achieve full voting rights for African-Americans in the southern United States. Previous marches in that area had been violently suppressed. Despite threats of more violence, the marchers here press forward, determined to ensure that the United States would, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "live out the true meaning of its creed."

In a classroom, a teacher could ask students to notice the similarities in composition and theme between this photograph and the painting of Washington and his army. The Americans in these two images were separated in time by nearly two centuries. Yet they are united by a common purpose — the struggle to uphold our nation's founding principles of freedom and equality for all.

This is just one example of how Picturing America can enhance the appreciation of U.S. history and culture among our people.

But Picturing America can do more than just help U.S. citizens understand their nation from the inside. The NEH also believes that Picturing America can enable people of *other* nations to better understand the history, culture, and principles of the United States. So beyond our exhibit here at UNESCO, the NEH is exploring further possibilities for exhibiting Picturing America in other countries.

We also would be delighted if cultural ministries in other nations would consider how they might provide a similar program for their citizens — using their own nation's art to explore their national identity, history, and culture. The NEH is eager to share the lessons of our experience creating Picturing America with our counterparts in other countries, and we invite them to collaborate with us.

Let me close with a personal story. Perhaps I can best explain the purpose behind Picturing America by sharing my own experience of art's power to stimulate intellectual awakenings. When I was a child, my parents visited the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and they brought home a souvenir that would change my life: a portfolio of illustrations from the collections of the Gallery.

As I pondered these great works of art, I had the first glimmerings of what would become a lifelong pursuit: to study and understand the form, history, and meaning of art. This was my gateway to a wider intellectual world. Through that open door, I would delve into history, philosophy, religion, architecture, and literature — the entire universe of the humanities.

It is my hope, and the hope of the NEH, that “Picturing America” will provide a similar intellectual gateway for people in the United States and throughout the world.

Thank you for letting me share my thoughts with you this evening.

#####